

SEMPER FI SOCIETY OF ST LOUIS SPEECH

by LTGEN KELLY on 13 NOV 2010

Nine years ago two of the four commercial aircraft took off from Boston, Newark, and Washington. Took off fully loaded with men, women and children—all innocent, and all soon to die. These aircraft were targeted at the World Trade Towers in New York, the Pentagon, and likely the Capitol in Washington, D.C.. Three found their mark. No American alive old enough to remember will ever forget exactly where they were, exactly what they were doing, and exactly who they were with at the moment they watched the aircraft dive into the World Trade Towers on what was, until then, a beautiful morning in New York City. Within the hour 3,000 blameless human beings would be vaporized, incinerated, or crushed in the most agonizing ways imaginable. The most wretched among them—over 200—driven mad by heat, hopelessness, and utter desperation leapt to their deaths

from 1,000 feet above Lower Manhattan. We soon learned hundreds more were murdered at the Pentagon, and in a Pennsylvania farmer's field.

Once the buildings had collapsed and the immensity of the attack began to register most of us had no idea of what to do, or where to turn. As a nation, we were scared like we had not been scared for generations. Parents hugged their children to gain as much as to give comfort. Strangers embraced in the streets stunned and crying on one another's shoulders seeking solace, as much as to give it.

Instantaneously, American patriotism soared not "as the last refuge," as our national-cynical class would say, but in the darkest times Americans seek refuge in family, and in country, remembering that strong men and women have always stepped forward to protect the nation when the need was dire—and it was so God awful dire that day—and remains so today.

There was, however, a small segment of America that made very different choices that day...actions the rest of America stood in awe of on 9/11 and every day since. The first were our firefighters and police, their ranks decimated that day as they ran towards—not away from—danger and certain death. They were doing what they'd sworn to do—"protect and serve"—and went to their graves having fulfilled their sacred oath. Then there were the Armed Forces, and I know I am a little biased in my opinion here, but the best of them are Marines. Most wearing the Eagle, Globe and Anchor today joined the unbroken ranks of American heroes after that fateful day not for money, or promises of bonuses, or travel to exotic liberty ports, but for one reason and one reason alone; because of the terrible assault on our way of life by men they knew must be killed and extremist ideology that must be destroyed. A plastic flag in their car window was not their response to the murderous assault on our

country. No, their response was a commitment to protect the nation swearing an oath to their God to do so, to their deaths. When future generations ask why America is still free and the heyday of Al Qaeda and their terrorist allies was counted in days rather than in centuries as the extremists themselves predicted, our hometown heroes—soldiers, sailors, airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Marines—can say, “because of me and people like me who risked all to protect millions who will never know my name.”

As we sit here right now, we should not lose sight of the fact that America is at risk in a way it has never been before. Our enemy fights for an ideology based on an irrational hatred of who we are. Make no mistake about that no matter what certain elements of the “chattering class” relentlessly churn out. We did not start this fight, and it will not end until the extremists understand that we as a people will never lose our faith or our courage. If they persist, these terrorists and

extremists and the nations that provide them sanctuary, they must know they will continue to be tracked down and captured or killed. America's civilian and military protectors both here at home and overseas have for nearly nine years fought this enemy to a standstill and have never for a second "wondered why." They know, and are not afraid. Their struggle is your struggle. They hold in disdain those who claim to support them but not the cause that takes their innocence, their limbs, and even their lives. As a democracy—"We the People"—and that by definition is every one of us—sent them away from home and hearth to fight our enemies. We are all responsible. I know it doesn't apply to those of us here tonight but if anyone thinks you can somehow thank them for their service, and not support the cause for which they fight—America's survival—then they are lying to themselves and rationalizing away something in

their lives, but, more importantly, they are slighting our warriors and mocking their commitment to the nation.

Since this generation's "day of infamy" the American military has handed our ruthless enemy defeat-after-defeat but it will go on for years, if not decades, before this curse has been eradicated. We have done this by unceasing pursuit day and night into whatever miserable lair Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and their allies, might slither into to lay in wait for future opportunities to strike a blow at freedom.

America's warriors have never lost faith in their mission, or doubted the correctness of their cause. They face dangers everyday that their countrymen safe and comfortable this night cannot imagine. But this has always been the case in all the wars our military have been sent to fight. Not to build empires, or enslave peoples, but to free those held in the grip of tyrants while at the same time protecting our nation, its citizens, and our shared values. And, ladies and gentlemen,

think about this, the only territory we as a people have ever asked for from any nation we have fought alongside, or against, since our founding, the entire extent of our overseas empire, as a few hundred acres of land for the 24 American cemeteries scattered around the globe. It is in these cemeteries where 220,000 of our sons and daughters rest in glory for eternity, or are memorialized forever because their earthly remains are lost forever in the deepest depths of the oceans, or never recovered from far flung and nameless battlefields. As a people, we can be proud because billions across the planet today live free, and billions yet unborn will also enjoy the same freedom and a chance at prosperity because America sent its sons and daughters out to fight and die for them, as much as for us.

Yes, we are at war, and are winning, but you wouldn't know it because successes go unreported, and only when something does go sufficiently or is sufficiently

controversial, it is highlighted by the media elite that then sets up the “know it all” chattering class to offer their endless criticism. These self-proclaimed experts always seem to know better---but have never themselves been in the arena. We are at war and like it or not, that is a fact. It is not Bush’s war, and it is not Obama’s war, it is our war and we can’t run away from it. Even if we wanted to surrender, there is no one to surrender to. Our enemy is savage, offers absolutely no quarter, and has a single focus and that is either kill every one of us here at home, or enslave us with a sick form of extremism that serves no God or purpose that decent men and women could ever grasp. St Louis is as much at risk as is New York and Washington, D.C.. Given the opportunity to do another 9/11, our merciless enemy would do it today, tomorrow, and every day thereafter. If, and most in the know predict that it is only a matter of time, he acquires nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, these

extremists will use these weapons of mass murder against us without a moment's hesitation. These butchers we fight killed more than 3,000 innocents on 9/11. As horrible as that death toll was, consider for a moment that the monsters that organized those strikes against New York and Washington, D.C. killed only 3,000 not because that was enough to make their sick and demented point, but because he couldn't figure out how to kill 30,000, or 300,000, or 30 million of us that terrible day. I don't know why they hate us, and I don't care. We have a saying in the Marine Corps and that is "no better friend, no worse enemy, than a U.S. Marine." We always hope for the first, friendship, but are certainly more than ready for the second. If its death they want, its death they will get, and the Marines will continue showing them the way to hell if that's what will make them happy.

Because our America hasn't been successfully attacked since 9/11 many forget because we want to forget...to move

on. As Americans we all dream and hope for peace, but we must be realistic and acknowledge that hope is never an option or course of action when the stakes are so high. Others are less realistic or less committed, or are working their own agendas, and look for ways to blame past presidents or in some other way to rationalize a way out of this war. The problem is our enemy is not willing to let us go. Regardless of how much we wish this nightmare would go away, our enemy will stay forever on the offensive until he hurts us so badly we surrender, or we kill him first. To him, this is not about our friendship with Israel, or about territory, resources, jobs, or economic opportunity in the Middle East. No, it is about us as a people. About our freedom to worship any God we please in any way we want. It is about the worth of every man, and the worth of every woman, and their equality in the eyes of God and the law; of how we live our lives with our families, inside the privacy of our own homes.

It's about the God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." As Americans we hold these truths to be self-evident. He doesn't. We love what we have; he despises who we are. Our positions can never be reconciled. He cannot be deterred...only defeated. Compromise is out of the question.

It is a fact that our country today is in a life and death struggle against an evil enemy, but America as a whole is certainly not at war. Not as a country. Not as a people. Today, only a tiny fraction—less than a percent—shoulder the burden of fear and sacrifice, and they shoulder it for the rest of us. Their sons and daughters who serve are men and women of character who continue to believe in this country enough to put life and limb on the line without qualification, and without thought of personal gain, and they serve so that the sons and daughters of the other 99% don't have to. No

big deal, though, as Marines have always been “the first to fight” paying in full the bill that comes with being free...for everyone else.

The comforting news for every American is that our men and women in uniform, and every Marine, is as good today as any in our history. As good as what their heroic, under-appreciated, and largely abandoned fathers and uncles were in Vietnam, and their grandfathers were in Korea and World War II. They have the same steel in their backs and have made their own mark etching forever places like Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad, Iraq, and Helmand and Sangin, Afghanistan that are now part of the legend and stand just as proudly alongside Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima, Inchon, Hue City, Khe Sanh, and A Shau Valley, Vietnam. None of them have every asked what their country could do for them, but always and with their lives asked what they could do for America. While some might think we have produced yet another

generation of materialistic, consumeristic and self-absorbed young people, those who serve today have broken the mold and stepped out as real men, and real women, who are already making their own way in life while protecting ours. They know the real strength of a platoon, a battalion, or a country that is not worshiping at the altar of diversity, but in a melting pot that stitches and strengthens by a sense of shared history, values, customs, hopes and dreams all of which unifies a people making them stronger, as opposed to an unruly gaggle of “hyphenated” or “multi-cultural individuals.”

And what are they like in combat in this war? Like Marines have been throughout our history. In my three tours in combat as an infantry officer and commanding general, I never saw one of them hesitate, or do anything other than lean into the fire and with no apparent fear of death or injury take the fight to our enemies. As anyone who has ever

experienced combat knows, when it starts, when the explosions and tracers are everywhere and the calls for the Corpsman are screamed from the throats of men who know they are dying—when seconds seem like hours and it all becomes slow motion and fast forward at the same time—and the only rational act is to stop, get down, save yourself—they don't. When no one would call them coward for cowering behind a wall or in a hole, slave to the most basic of all human instincts—survival—none of them do. It doesn't matter if it's an IED, a suicide bomber, mortar attack, sniper, fighting in the upstairs room of a house, or all of it at once; they talk, swagger, and, most importantly, fight today in the same way America's Marines have since the Tun Tavern. They also know whose shoulders they stand on, and they will never shame any Marine living or dead.

We can also take comfort in the fact that these young Americans are not born killers, but are good and decent

young men and women who for going on ten years have performed remarkable acts of bravery and selflessness to a cause they have decided is bigger and more important than themselves. Only a few months ago they were delivering your paper, stocking shelves in the local grocery store, worshiping in church on Sunday, or playing hockey on local ice. Like my own two sons who are Marines and have fought in Iraq, and today in Sangin, Afghanistan, they are also the same kids that drove their cars too fast for your liking, and played the God-awful music of their generation too loud, but have no doubt they are the finest of their generation. Like those who went before them in uniform, we owe them everything. We owe them our safety. We owe them our prosperity. We owe them our freedom. We owe them our lives. Any one of them could have done something more self-serving with their lives as the vast majority of their age group elected to do after high school and college, but no,

they chose to serve knowing full well a brutal war was in their future. They did not avoid the basic and cherished responsibility of a citizen—the defense of country—they welcomed it. They are the very best this country produces, and have put every one of us ahead of themselves. All are heroes for simply stepping forward, and we as a people owe a debt we can never fully pay. Their legacy will be of selfless valor, the country we live in, the way we live our lives, and the freedoms the rest of their countrymen take for granted.

Over 5,000 have died thus far in this war; 8,000 if you include the innocents murdered on 9/11. They are overwhelmingly working class kids, the children of cops and firefighters, city and factory workers, school teachers and small business owners. With some exceptions they are from families short on stock portfolios and futures, but long on love of country and service to the nation. Just yesterday, too many were lost and a knock on the door late last night

brought their families to their knees in a grief that will never-
ever go away. Thousands more have suffered wounds since
it all started, but like anyone who loses life or limb while
serving others—including our firefighters and law
enforcement personnel who on 9/11 were the first casualties
of this war—they are not victims as they knew what they
were about, and were doing what they wanted to do. The
chattering class and all those who doubt America's
intentions, and resolve, endeavor to make them and their
families out to be victims, but they are wrong. We who have
served and are serving refuse their sympathy. Those of us
who have lived in the dirt, sweat and struggle of the arena
are not victims and will have none of that. Those with less of
a sense of service to the nation never understand it when
men and women of character step forward to look danger
and adversity straight in the eye, refusing to blink, or give
ground, even to their own deaths. The protected can't begin

to understand the price paid so they and their families can sleep safe and free at night. No, they are not victims, but are warriors, your warriors, and warriors are never victims regardless of how and where they fall. Death, or fear of death, has no power over them. Their paths are paved by sacrifice, sacrifices they gladly make...for you. They prove themselves everyday on the field of battle...for you. They fight in every corner of the globe...for you. They live to fight...for you, and they never rest because there is always another battle to be won in the defense of America.

I will leave you with a story about the kind of people they are...about the quality of the steel in their backs...about the kind of dedication they bring to our country while they serve in uniform and forever after as veterans. Two years ago when I was the Commander of all U.S. and Iraqi forces, in fact, the 22nd of April 2008, two Marine infantry battalions, 1/9 “The Walking Dead,” and 2/8 were switching out in Ramadi.

One battalion, in the closing days of their deployment going home very soon, the other just starting its seven-month combat tour. Two Marines, Corporal Jonathan Yale and Lance Corporal Jordan Haerter, 22 and 20 years old respectively, one from each battalion, were assuming the watch together at the entrance gate of an outpost that contained a makeshift barracks housing 50 Marines. The same broken down ramshackle building was also home to 100 Iraqi police, also my men and our allies in the fight against the terrorists in Ramadi, a city until recently the most dangerous city on earth and owned by Al Qaeda. Yale was a dirt poor mixed-race kid from Virginia with a wife and daughter, and a mother and sister who lived with him and he supported as well. He did this on a yearly salary of less than \$23,000. Haerter, on the other hand, was a middle class white kid from Long Island. They were from two completely different worlds. Had they not joined the Marines they would

never have met each other, or understood that multiple America's exist simultaneously depending on one's race, education level, economic status, and where you might have been born. But they were Marines, combat Marines, forged in the same crucible of Marine training, and because of this bond they were brothers as close, or closer, than if they were born of the same woman.

The mission orders they received from the sergeant squad leader I am sure went something like: "Okay you two clowns, stand this post and let no unauthorized personnel or vehicles pass." "You clear?" I am also sure Yale and Haerter then rolled their eyes and said in unison something like: "Yes Sergeant," with just enough attitude that made the point without saying the words, "No kidding sweetheart, we know what we're doing." They then relieved two other Marines on watch and took up their post at the entry control

point of Joint Security Station Nasser, in the Sophia section of Ramadi, al Anbar, Iraq.

A few minutes later a large blue truck turned down the alley way—perhaps 60-70 yards in length—and sped its way through the serpentine of concrete jersey walls. The truck stopped just short of where the two were posted and detonated, killing them both catastrophically. Twenty-four brick masonry houses were damaged or destroyed. A mosque 100 yards away collapsed. The truck's engine came to rest two hundred yards away knocking most of a house down before it stopped. Our explosive experts reckoned the blast was made of 2,000 pounds of explosives. Two died, and because these two young infantrymen didn't have it in their DNA to run from danger, they saved 150 of their Iraqi and American brothers-in-arms.

When I read the situation report about the incident a few hours after it happened I called the regimental commander

for details as something about this struck me as different. Marines dying or being seriously wounded is commonplace in combat. We expect Marines regardless of rank or MOS to stand their ground and do their duty, and even die in the process, if that is what the mission takes. But this just seemed different. The regimental commander had just returned from the site and he agreed, but reported that there were no American witnesses to the event—just Iraqi police. I figured if there was any chance of finding out what actually happened and then to decorate the two Marines to acknowledge their bravery, I'd have to do it as a combat award that requires two eye-witnesses and we figured the bureaucrats back in Washington would never buy Iraqi statements. If it had any chance at all, it had to come under the signature of a general officer.

I traveled to Ramadi the next day and spoke individually to a half-dozen Iraqi police all of whom told the same story.

The blue truck turned down into the alley and immediately sped up as it made its way through the serpentine. They all said, “We knew immediately what was going on as soon as the two Marines began firing.” The Iraqi police then related that some of them also fired, and then to a man, ran for safety just prior to the explosion. All survived. Many were injured...some seriously. One of the Iraqis elaborated and with tears welling up said, “They’d run like any normal man would to save his life.” “What he didn’t know until then,” he said, “and what he learned that very instant, was that Marines are not normal.” Choking past the emotion he said, “Sir, in the name of God no sane man would have stood there and done what they did.” “No sane man.” “They saved us all.”

What we didn’t know at the time, and only learned a couple of days later after I wrote a summary and submitted both Yale and Haerter for posthumous Navy Crosses, was

that one of our security cameras, damaged initially in the blast, recorded some of the suicide attack. It happened exactly as the Iraqis had described it. It took exactly six seconds from when the truck entered the alley until it detonated.

You can watch the last six seconds of their young lives. Putting myself in their heads I supposed it took about a second for the two Marines to separately come to the same conclusion about what was going on once the truck came into their view at the far end of the alley. Exactly no time to talk it over, or call the sergeant to ask what they should do. Only enough time to take half an instant and think about what the sergeant told them to do only a few minutes before: "...let no unauthorized personnel or vehicles pass." The two Marines had about five seconds left to live.

It took maybe another two seconds for them to present their weapons, take aim, and open up. By this time the truck

was half-way through the barriers and gaining speed the whole time. Here, the recording shows a number of Iraqi police, some of whom had fired their AKs, now scattering like the normal and rational men they were—some running right past the Marines. They had three seconds left to live.

For about two seconds more, the recording shows the Marines' weapons firing non-stop...the truck's windshield exploding into shards of glass as their rounds take it apart and tore in to the body of the son-of-a-bitch who is trying to get past them to kill their brothers—American and Iraqi—bedded down in the barracks totally unaware of the fact that their lives at that moment depended entirely on two Marines standing their ground. If they had been aware, they would have known they were safe...because two Marines stood between them and a crazed suicide bomber. The recording shows the truck careening to a stop immediately in front of the two Marines. In all of the instantaneous violence Yale

and Haerter never hesitated. By all reports and by the recording, they never stepped back. They never even started to step aside. They never even shifted their weight. With their feet spread should width apart, they leaned into the danger, firing as fast as they could work their weapons. They had only one second left to live.

The truck explodes. The camera goes blank. Two young men go to their God. Six seconds. Not enough time to think about their families, their country, their flag, or about their lives or their deaths, but more than enough time for two very brave young men to do their duty...into eternity. That is the kind of people who are on watch all over the world tonight—for you.

We Marines believe that God gave America the greatest gift he could bestow to man while he lived on this earth—freedom. We also believe he gave us another gift nearly as precious—our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Coast Guardsmen,

and Marines—to safeguard that gift and guarantee no force on this earth can every steal it away. It has been my distinct honor to have been with you here today. Rest assured our America, this experiment in democracy started over two centuries ago, will forever remain the “land of the free and home of the brave” so long as we never run out of tough young Americans who are willing to look beyond their own self-interest and comfortable lives, and go into the darkest and most dangerous places on earth to hunt down, and kill, those who would do us harm. God Bless America, and....SEMPER FIDELIS!